

# OUR WAVIN' FLAG: U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OUTREACH DURING THE 2010 WORLD CUP

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## Abstract

In March 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama, an avid sports fan, sat down to talk with sports writer Bill Simmons.<sup>1</sup> He explained why competition on the field connects radically different people to each other, "People - for all our differences politically, regionally, economically - most folks understand sports. Probably because it's one of the few places where it's a true meritocracy. There's not a lot of BS. Ultimately, who's winning, who's losing, who's performing, who's not - it's all laid out there."

In many ways, sports is a perfect unifier. A fan need not be literate, educated, well-traveled, or wealthy to be personally engaged in the fate of a team or the outcome of a competition. Sports watching is not gender-specific and is generally a safe, widely accepted way to pass significant amounts of time, something that the industry and advertisers rely on heavily. It is, in essence, an ideal vehicle for public relations and public diplomacy.

## Key Words

FIFA, World Cup, sports diplomacy, South Africa, public affairs, media relations, nation branding, reputation management, economic impact

## Building platforms, using platforms

Public diplomacy is the dynamic public relations side of U.S. Government outreach and diplomacy abroad. It is where we reach out to youth, media, and general audiences to establish our "street cred" and build a cross-cultural communication space that can be accessed when the United States needs to promote policy or propose change. Often we are introducing positive change - initiatives intended to benefit millions worldwide, such as the Feed the Future Initiative and the Clean Cookstoves Alliance - and at other times, we are responding to change that brings with it the threat of instability and disrupted lives, such as tsunamis or earthquakes in Asia or the consequences of the invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring. In either case, ongoing public diplomacy work, when done effectively, has established the platform from which the latest American government messages can reach broad audiences - audiences who, in today's fast-paced, interconnected world, have greater-than-ever access to inside information and are able to directly influence the day-to-day making of bilateral and multilateral foreign policy.

When I joined the United States Information Agency (USIA) nearly twenty years ago, I was told that our mission was "telling America's story to the world."<sup>2</sup> In 2012, the world has changed, and the mission has changed. We no longer "tell" people things; we are part of a two-way dialogue. And it's no longer just about "America's story;" it's about promoting universal human rights, eliminating poverty, fighting HIV/AIDS, and building partnerships with other nations. Just as social media is today revolutionizing the historical one-way trajectory of information, public diplomacy has now shifted its role in U.S. diplomatic relations to reflect a foreign policy of extended hands, and equal parts talking and listening.

Communications is a complicated business these days. Corporations and products compete with media organizations and government programs for the public's attention, while individuals empowered with webcams and smart phones add their own "news" to the world's information repository. In order to push our messages to the top of the overloaded chart, smart public diplomacy requires a combination of traditional media, cutting edge new media, and "target-of-opportunity" messaging platforms. As in the business world, public diplomacy practitioners can realize a benefit (positive externality) from a "target of opportunity" world event in which they are not directly involved. Events such as international sporting competitions, natural disasters, and scientific breakthroughs generate large scale news coverage. Public diplomacy messages can receive much greater attention if they are used in conjunction with this type of news-generating event.

Combining all three of these platforms in a coordinated strategy greatly magnifies the impact of public diplomacy and expands audiences much more quickly. To do this, the U.S. Department of State created new offices, hired tech experts and special advisors, and developed new training modules to get our public diplomacy corps - as well as ambassadors, junior officers, and everyone in between - up to speed on this "brave new world." The rate of adoption still varies widely from embassy to embassy and among individuals, yet we are clearly off down the path to a very new, modern version of 21st-century public diplomacy, and there is general agreement that it's the right direction to best support U.S. global interests.

*We're going to be there anyway, let's take advantage of it*

Worldwide and regional sporting events are ideal "target of opportunity" platforms for public diplomacy outreach. The world's attention is captured by the competition, history, and advertising. This is not sports diplomacy in the classic ping-pong diplomacy sense; we are not initiating an exchange nor are we recruiting the participants and tasking them with a mission beyond winning the game. Instead, we use the event to capitalize on the corporate world's significant investment and ability to attract massive audiences by finding niche areas where we can put U.S. messages on display. Our external benefit is the guaranteed interest and good will that come with being a part of the competition, even if only circumstantially. International sporting events are ideal platforms for highlighting evergreen U.S. government messages (e.g., consular support for U.S. citizens, strengthening bilateral cooperation, cultural exchange) and expanding perennial policy messages (e.g., the United States is a responsible world citizen, whose actions and policies - from security to trade and development - promote the greater good).

I served as the press attache at the U.S. Mission to South Africa during the 2010 World Cup. It was an exceptional public diplomacy outreach opportunity, both for us and for the South Africans. Soccer is the most popular sport in the world and is ruled by the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), originally an all-European organization, founded in 1904 and based in Zurich, Switzerland. Today, FIFA is a multi-billion dollar industry and has arguably been more successful than the United Nations (UN) in bringing countries and people together, albeit for limited contact in stadiums and on playing fields. While cynics would note that these exchanges are more for commercial reasons than for any real conflict resolution, the fact remains that both North and South Korea, Iran and Iraq, and Egypt and Israel have all sent teams to FIFA competitions in the last forty years. And with expanding markets in mind, its signature competition, the World Cup, moves every four years to a growing list of new host countries and regions. In 2002, it was held for the first time in Asia (Japan and South Korea); in 2010, it went for the first time to Africa (South Africa); and in 2018 and 2022, it will be hosted for the first time in the Slavic and Arab world (Russia and Qatar, respectively).

<sup>1</sup>Bill Simmons, "B.S. Report Transcript: Barack Obama," Grantland (blog), March 1, 2012 (7:33am), [http://www.grantland.com/blog/the-triangle/post/\\_/id/18690/b-s-report-transcript-barack-obama](http://www.grantland.com/blog/the-triangle/post/_/id/18690/b-s-report-transcript-barack-obama)

<sup>2</sup> Allen Hansen, "USIA's story told in re-issued video," Public Diplomacy Alumni Association, January 2012, <http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/pages/index.php?page=what-was-usia>

*Vuvuzelas and disk dancing: A South African World Cup*

The 2010 FIFA World Cup was a major test for South Africa. For the first time since the end of apartheid, the "Rainbow Nation" was prominently featured in daily global media for a prolonged period of time. FIFA estimates that over 3.2 billion people watched the games internationally. They brag that it was even shown in Antarctica and above the Arctic Circle.<sup>3</sup> A record-breaking 111.6 million Americans watched at least six minutes of the Cup; this number is up twenty-two percent from the previous Cup and indicates that fifty percent of all American households watched at least a portion of the competition.<sup>4</sup> Even more people followed the games through online, mobile, and social media, dramatically expanding the Cup's audiences and impact.

South Africa invested over \$5 billion preparing for the competition:<sup>5</sup> building new roads and public transport systems; erecting massive, state-of-the-art stadiums; and purchasing large scale international advertising campaigns to promote itself as the World Cup host country. The nation's leaders understood that this was an opportunity not to be missed. They even commissioned a special dance, the "diski" (township slang for "soccer"), which combined a variety of soccer moves, as part of their effort to build a uniquely South African identity for the 2010 World Cup. Ironically, the issue that fostered worldwide debate was not the disk dancing but whether or not to ban the favorite instrument of soccer fans throughout South Africa - the strikingly loud plastic horn called the "vuvuzela."

When all was said and done, and after the last Spanish fan bellowed in victory on July 11, South Africa received good marks for its hosting efforts.<sup>6</sup> Tourism Minister Martin van Schalkwyk reported that over 309,000 tourists came for the Cup, boosting the economy by over \$320 million. More importantly, he noted that evaluations from visitors showed that ninety-five percent of them rated their South Africa experience as good or extremely good.<sup>7</sup> Against this backdrop of excitement and intense preparation, two significant niche factors stood out for us at the U.S. Embassy: that the largest foreign national group of visitors to the Cup would be Americans (over 30,000) and that the U.S. National Team came with a solid reputation and a fighting chance to win its first round of competition. Both of these elements provided a wealth of public diplomacy opportunities.

*Media blitz descends*

The World Cup International Broadcast Centre accredited 13,000 journalists. In addition to the pure sports reporters-who spent their time scrutinizing diving headers, tracking yellow cards, and debating who was best at penalty kicks-travel, feature, and news writers also flocked to the games, looking to fill their papers with stories about South Africa's economy, security, and its rising place in the world pecking order. That's where we came in.

The United States has worked hard to build a strong bilateral relationship with South Africa following a very tense relationship during the apartheid years and the transition to democracy in 1994. Trade and economic ties have grown steadily to the point where the United States is now South Africa's third largest export market.<sup>8</sup> In April 2010, the two nations agreed to an ongoing strategic dialogue to promote further cooperation in trade, investment, health, and several other areas. The elections of U.S. President Obama in 2008 and South African President Zuma in 2009 brought new opportunities for good will on both sides, from the man in the street to the politicians at the top. At the U.S. Mission, we designed our public messaging to emphasize our belief in South Africa's ability to host the World Cup - the largest event ever to be hosted in Africa - and to showcase our offer of partnership in a variety of forms of support.

<sup>3</sup> "Almost half the world tuned in at home to watch 2010 FIFA World Cup South AfricaTM," FIFA.com, July 11, 2011, <http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/archive/southafrica2010/organisation/media/newsid=1473143/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> "2010 World Cup Reaches Nearly 112 Million U.S. Viewers," Nielsen Wire (blog), July 13, 2010, [http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media\\_entertainment/2010-world-cup-reaches-nearly-112-million-u-s-viewers/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media_entertainment/2010-world-cup-reaches-nearly-112-million-u-s-viewers/)

<sup>5</sup> "Background Note: South Africa: Impact of the 2010 FIFA World Cup," state.gov, January 30, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2898.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Owen Gibson, "World Cup 2010: South Africa leaves a World Cup legacy to remember," *The Guardian*, July 12, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/blog/2010/jul/12/south-africa-world-cup-2010>

<sup>7</sup> "Survey on World Cup tourism impact results," Bizcommunity.com, December 7, 2010, <http://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/445/55106.html>

<sup>8</sup> "Background Note: South Africa: Trade and Investment," state.gov, January 30, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2898.htm>

The U.S. Government sent teams of security experts to work with their peers in the police force and business community on large event security management, threat identification, and information sharing. Our consular officers developed strong lines of communication with counterparts and crisis management plans to assist American tourists if they fell victim to crimes or other dangers. These partnerships were highlighted to the media and used as platforms to talk about U.S. cooperation with South Africa in making the games a success.

U.S. Ambassador Donald Gips was our chief spokesman, appearing on TV, radio, and in print, sometimes wearing a business suit but, more frequently, a soccer shirt. Months before the opening night, Ambassador Gips enthusiastically adopted the South African governmental pep rally campaign, "Football Fridays," at the U.S.<sup>9</sup> Mission. Every Friday, led by the president's personal representative himself, all 800-plus Mission employees were asked to wear soccer jerseys to build spirit for the upcoming Cup. He gave interviews in his brightly colored shirts, and we placed him strategically with a variety of media outlets, including South African Airways' inflight magazine. His messages were consistent and stressed the key story of our bilateral policy: "We believe in South Africa's ability to host a successful World Cup; having more Americans attend than any other foreign national group speaks to the strength of this relationship; and our partnership will continue to grow stronger as a result of this event." The perfect storm of social media growth in South Africa, and for our Mission, coincided with the World Cup. Arriving a bit late on the global internet stage, South Africa leapt ahead in 2010, surpassing five million users (a fifteen percent growth over 2009 and equaling ten percent penetration nationwide, according to Johannesburg-based technology research company Worldwide Worx)!<sup>10</sup> My office launched the Mission's new social media presence (Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and MXit, a popular South Africa cell phone app) in 2009. Using an aggressive approach of uploading new content - mostly local, continental, and nonbureaucratic information links and comments - five to ten times per day, our Facebook site alone grew to approximately 15,000 fans in its first two years.

Entering the social media market at that moment with the right strategy reaped ideal returns. Journalists, thought leaders, and young people were starting to flock to online technologies, and our platforms were some of the most active in this new community of trendsetters. For 2010, we used all of these resources to push out important messages of support and partnership, as well as statements for American citizens on security and travel precautions. We then added a dedicated U.S. Embassy World Cup website to share consular information, local news reports, and photos with fans in and outside the country. Further amplifying our new media outreach, I wrote a series of World Cup blogs for the Department's blogsite, DipNote, covering U.S. Vice President Biden's visit for the opening, my impressions of the games, and other first-hand reports. Each blog was a window into Mission activities with a clear focus on our engagement with the host country and our active commitment to the bilateral relationship.

*Bringing in the team*

One of the great pleasures of working the World Cup was interacting with the U.S. National Men's Soccer Team. The team and its entourage of family members and close supporters were well organized, friendly, and greatly appreciative of Embassy assistance. Making it clear at the start that their practice times and preparation for games were paramount, they agreed to participate in a limited number of public diplomacy events.

We organized an open team practice,<sup>11</sup> to which we bused hundreds of HIV/AIDS orphans and vulnerable children - all participants in U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs funded by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Over thirty local and international media came to record the cheering kids, each with an American flag-adorned vuvuzela, and the friendly mayhem that followed when the U.S. players autographed their t-shirts and posed for photos. The afternoon event was both a heart-warming opportunity for poor township kids to shake hands with real World Cup players and a springboard for the Mission to talk about the U.S. commitment to fighting HIV/AIDS, our top bilateral funding priority.

My office further arranged to have the branding for America's 2018-2022 World Cup bid projected onto the sides of our Embassy building at night during the Cup. As the Embassy sits just a few blocks from Pretoria's only World

<sup>9</sup> Sharon Hudson-Dean, "Nine Days to Kick-off," DipNote (blog), June 2, 2010, [http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/site/entry/nine\\_days\\_to\\_kick-off](http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/site/entry/nine_days_to_kick-off)

<sup>10</sup> "SA Internet Growth Accelerates," WorldWideWorx.com, June 16, 2012, (11:27am), <http://www.worldwideworx.com/?p=234>

<sup>11</sup> Sharon Hudson-Dean, "U.S. Soccer Team Connects With South African Youth," DipNote (blog), June 10, 2010, [http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/site/entry/soccer\\_youth](http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/site/entry/soccer_youth)



Cup stadium, thousands of spectators saw the display. The United States was bidding to host the 2018 or 2022 World Cup, either of which promised major economic boosts for the host nation, and the U.S. bid committee welcomed our support. Although, we ultimately did not win the right to host either Cup, our message to soccer fans was clear: the U.S. is an eager, long-term member of the world soccer community.

U.S. consulates in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban also organized public diplomacy outreach events without the U.S. National Team, which was based in Pretoria. All of them held viewing parties of U.S. matches for local students and contacts. The U.S. Consulate in Durban organized numerous events featuring Fulbright scholar Dr. Peter Alegi of Michigan State University.<sup>12</sup> Based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for the year, Alegi had written a book entitled *African Soccerscapes: How a Continent Changed the World's Game* and used his Fulbright tenure in South Africa to launch it; he also gave numerous lectures and served as a regular commentator for The New York Times, National Public Radio, and numerous South African media outlets during the Cup. The Johannesburg consulate created an innovative partnership with GlobalGirl Media, an American NGO that trained low income girls, many of them living with HIV and AIDS, to serve as sports journalists to cover the Cup. The program recruited girls from Soweto and gave them access to team trainings and other Cup functions.<sup>13</sup> Today, the girls continue to produce YouTube videos and digital reports on important topics in their lives, and some are on their way to careers as professional journalists.

### *Did it make a difference?*

Public diplomacy success is notoriously hard to measure. Website hits do not accurately measure levels of approval or degrees of support. An active Facebook fan will not necessarily turn around and tell his government to support the U.S. position on climate change. But several things remained effective long after the stadiums and hotels were emptied in July 2010—our social media outreach platforms are still robust and actively followed, and our early support for the South Africans as capable hosts was widely recognized and appreciated. Both of these outcomes took our bilateral relationship a solid step forward and helped us pursue the nuts and bolts of diplomacy,<sup>14</sup> including our ongoing trade and security negotiations, and efforts to promote regional development cooperation.

In addition, Embassy public diplomacy played a role in firmly establishing the United States as a real soccer nation. Many people around the world saw us fully engaging in the World Cup, saw Team USA performing well, and saw our countrymen and countrywomen following the Cup in record numbers. From Rio and Abidjan to Seoul and Tehran, this means something. We gained global respect and we learned to speak the universal language of soccer, all things that bring us a little bit closer together in a conversation that for a lot of people is an important part of their daily lives.

When the U.S. Team departed, they left behind eighty Adidas "jabulanis," the official match balls of the World Cup final. The team received them as FIFA souvenirs, but asked that we put them to good use in our public diplomacy instead. I reached out to John Perlman, a popular Johannesburg radio talk show host who also leads an NGO that obtains equipment and coaching for township and rural community soccer leagues. His "Dreamfields Project" gladly received the balls, as well as our leftover USA vuvuzelas and sun hats, and donated them to the children of Kagiso, Orange Farm, and Pimville.

While geographically very close to Johannesburg's massive Soccer City stadium, these three poor communities were very far from the pulse, money, and glitz of the World Cup. The day of the donation, the children took to the field for a hard-fought mini-tournament. The jabulani balls they received were the closest those kids got to a World Cup game that summer. Most likely, very few of them will interact with Americans in the future, but they were an important part of our public diplomacy that day. Standing with their coaches and the NGO team, I cheered them on and hoped they walked away thinking not only about their new gear but also about my parting words to the group, "The United States believes in a better future for both our countries, and we're working together to build that future."

"2010 World Cup Reaches Nearly 112 Million U.S. Viewers," Nielsen Wire Blog, July 13, 2010, [http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media\\_entertainment/2010-world-cup-reaches-nearly-112-million-u-s-viewers/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media_entertainment/2010-world-cup-reaches-nearly-112-million-u-s-viewers/).

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<sup>12</sup>"Peter Alegi - Author of Book on Soccer in Africa," Fulbright.state.gov, January-December 2010, <http://fulbright.state.gov/participating-countries/africa/south-africa/alegi.html>

<sup>13</sup> Tabby Biddle, "Why Mentoring Young Women and Girls is Important," *Huffington Post* (blog), May 24, 2010 (1:32pm), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tabby-biddle/why-mentoring-young-women\\_b\\_584478.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tabby-biddle/why-mentoring-young-women_b_584478.html)

<sup>14</sup> US Soccer Stars Pass the Ball," Dreamfields Project, July 16, 2010, <http://www.dreamfieldsproject.org/news.aspx?newsitemid=46>